INTERNATIONAL LONGSHORE AND WAREHOUSE UNION

PACIFIC COAST PENSIONERS ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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CLARENCE THOMAS OF ILWU LOCAL 10, PCPA
PART 1 OF 3

INTERVIEWEE: CLARENCE THOMAS

INTERVIEWER: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

SUBJECTS: BLACK LONGSHORE WORKERS; ILWU LOCAL 10; CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT; OAKLAND; ANTI-APARTHEID; VIETNAM WAR; BLACK STUDENT UNION; SAN FRANCISCO STATE COLLEGE STRIKE; BLACK PANTHER PARTY; THIRD WORLD LIBERATION FRONT; MINORITY CONTRACTORS AND CRAFTSMEN TRADE ASSOCIATION; STEADYMEN; WALKING BOSS; SOUTHERN AFRICA LIBERATION SUPPORT COMMITTEE; BLACK RADICAL TRADITION; CLEOPHAS WILLIAMS; LEO ROBINSON

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY:** This is Harvey Schwartz. I'm in El Cerrito, California. Today we're interviewing Clarence Thomas. Clarence is in Richmond [California] and he is a retired longshore worker. This is part of the Pacific Coast Pensioners Association Oral History Project, which is housed at the University of Washington in the [Labor] Archives of the State of Washington. The Director of the program there is Conor Casey, who is doing the technical services for us this morning. Thank you both for being here. I think we should now go forward.

[00:00:45] Picture 21, please. There's a wonderful picture of Clarence. I presume this was taken by your wife, Delores. Is that right?

[00:00:59] **CLARENCE:** No, actually, this was a still shot of a video that was done right before the Super Tuesday in 2016 [sic,] . There was a group called Blacks for Bernie Sanders and they interviewed me about the issue concerning [?Power?] Terminal. This is a still from the beginning of that video.

[00:01:33] **HARVEY:** We thought that would be a good picture to start with.

[00:01:35] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, that was me in 2016.

[00:01:39] **HARVEY:** It's a good shot. I thought we could start with that. Clarence, can you tell me your date of birth and where you were born and so forth?

[00:01:54] **CLARENCE:** My date of birth is August 21, 1947. I was born and raised in Oakland, California, the eldest of five children.

[00:02:10] **HARVEY:** What did your parents do for work?

[00:02:15] **CLARENCE:** My father, in his earlier years, was a postal worker. In 1963, he became a longshore worker. It was a longtime ambition for him to become a longshore worker. My maternal grandfather started out working at Morris Shipyard, and then two years later, he was hired as a longshore worker with ILWU, Local 10. He had been involved with working as a maritime worker in Louisiana before he came to California. He resided on Union Street in West Oakland, which was just a few minutes away from the Port of Oakland, and I used to spend a lot of time with my grandparents.

[00:03:40] My mother was a homemaker. She did some work in later years, but nothing really organized. She did domestic work. She did go to nursing school for a period of time in San Francisco, but she gave that up after our fourth sibling arrived in 1957, and so she was a stay-at-home mom.

[00:04:10] My mother and father were both highly political people. I can remember in 1959, when Senator John Kennedy was running for president, he spoke at an iconic venue in West Oakland called to De Fremery Park, and both of my parents went to see him speak.

[00:04:33] My mother was very involved with the Parent Teacher Association [PTA]. My mother had a lot of charisma. She was very outspoken and people looked to her for leadership. She was also involved with the Negro Women's Democratic Club. I teased her by saying, "That was once a radical organization." It was made up of women from West Oakland. But some of my earliest memories of my mother and politics happened when I was very young.

[00:05:06] I don't know why this stood out in my mind, but it was during the McCarthy hearings. I can remember, we had a television, and I can remember my mother watching it on TV. Both of my parents voted, had a strong history and tradition of that being in the family. As far as the influence of, I guess you could say, a social and political awareness of the Civil Rights Movement, that took place for me watching television. Back in the day, we had three major television stations. We had NBC, ABC and CBS. I can remember watching the

struggle unfolding right in our living rooms of the Civil Rights Movement, of young people marching and being attacked with fire hoses and dogs, and I learned who Dr. King was.

[00:06:08] But I think it's worth mentioning that I must have been about eight years old, and I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents, being the eldest grandchild. They were doting grandparents, so the first time I ever heard the name Harry Bridges mentioned was at my grandparents' dinner table. My grandfather used to bring longshore workers and seamen home for lunch. That was not an uncommon thing for him to do. Interestingly enough, he worked in an all-white gang. I really couldn't get my hands on why that was, but he did, and he used to bring guys home for lunch, and I can remember, discussions regarding Harry Bridges and the union. I can't recall the specifics, but I was old enough to understand that Harry Bridges was an important person. He was someone in the newspaper.

[00:07:14] It was also the first time I'd ever heard the name Paul Robeson mentioned, and I had a really difficult time coming to grips with how my grandfather described Robeson as being this wonderful singer, and this actor, and former all-American football player, and I just couldn't understand why I hadn't heard of him. I knew who Dr. Martin Luther King was, I knew who Jackie Robinson was, but I never heard of him. It took me some time to understand.

[00:07:50] He explained to me that they said he was a communist. When you're young, you have some idea about communism, because that's the enemy. They used to have us doing these exercises at school for civil defense, where we'd get under our desks, in case there was a bombing of something, if you can remember. I was a child of the 1950s, so the McCarthy Era and the Cold War were really heating up during that time.

[00:08:24] I think one of the most interesting moments in my youth was having my paternal and maternal grandfathers, along with my dad, going to see the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King at the Oakland Auditorium for the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. I can't remember all the specifics of what Dr. King said. It probably was something that my grandparents probably said, "You're going to go to this and listen." That was probably the first time that I'd ever been in the midst of that many Black people before, and I thought that was a special moment, because I understood that on both sides of my family, my grandparents paid attention, they watched the news, they read newspapers.

[00:09:32] My father was the one that got me familiar with who Malcolm X was, because my father used to buy the Muhammad Speaks newspaper. That was the newspaper that the Nation of Islam published. And in reading that newspaper, that's when I really became somewhat familiar with international events in, in Southern Africa, specifically, the struggle in Rhodesia, which is now Zimbabwe, and Ian Smith, and I began to understand that this was taking place when I was in high school. But Malcolm X, my father bought the newspaper home, and he also watched Malcolm when he was on television being interviewed by such a journalist as Mike Wallace, and people like David Susskind, and others, who came on late at night.

[00:10:30] I can remember listening to Malcolm and being enthralled by his intellect and how he was so much different from Dr. King inasmuch as his analysis of things. I think that probably a great deal of that had to do with it, in terms of growing up in Oakland, and having, you know, being integrated schools. All of the schools that I attended in Oakland were all integrated, starting with Santa Fe School in North Oakland, and then Woodrow Wilson Junior High and Oakland Tech.

[00:11:12] I can remember my father discussing what his first first day of school was like when he arrived from Mississippi. At that time, West Oakland was predominantly Italian and Portuguese. Subsequently, it became a predominantly African American community, following in the early 1940s with the Second Great Migration.

[00:11:37] My father talked about his first day at Clawson Elementary School, which is now an upscale condominium in West Oakland, how he got into a fight with a white boy on his first day of school. His uncle wanted to know, "How could this happen on your first day?" But that kind of symbolizes my father and the kind of personality that he had. He wasn't the kind of guy who believed in turning the other cheek. Neither was my mother. They respected Dr. King, but they were much more militant.

[00:12:11] I could remember my parents both giving all of my siblings and myself what I would call coping mechanisms with growing up as Black children telling us, "Don't go along with the crowd. Think for yourself. Treat people the way that they treat you—or should I say the way that you would like to be treated—but don't back down. Stand your ground, but at the same time, be respectful of people."

[00:12:45] That was something that we grew up with. I would say that in terms of the understanding of what Malcolm X was all about, I read his book, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. But one of the first books that I read as a youngster was a book called Manchild in the Promised Land by a man by the name Claude Brown. He was from New York City, and he had grown up with Floyd Patterson, former heavyweight champion, and he described what life was like in Harlem, and it was so much different from the life that I had lived in Oakland.

[00:13:22] I would say that my childhood was a pretty bright one. I didn't realize—I guess the best way to describe it—how disadvantaged that I was until I got into high school and started to associate with people who came from more privileged backgrounds. But I would have to say this. My parents moved from West Oakland to North Oakland in 1956. At that time, there was what you would call white flight—whites were moving to more upscale communities, to the suburbs—Concord, Castro Valley, Orinda, various other places—so whites were leaving North Oakland.

[00:14:20] I did not go to segregated schools. I knew white children. White children were in my classrooms. We competed with them. We took the same IQ tests. There were Black children in the class, and we were just as smart if not smarter than white children, so we didn't grow up within the apartheid, so the discrimination that we faced was much more subtle. As children, we couldn't necessarily really understand it all, but our parents could.

[00:14:52] But I think, for growing up in Oakland, it was a pleasant experience. We lived in a home. My grandparents lived up the street in North Oakland, and I can tell you that I was a pretty happy child growing up. I understood that there were certain things that we did not have and that was because of the structure of white supremacy and discrimination. Back in those days, even if you were a Black person who was educated and had a degree, your options were very, very limited.

[00:15:33] They were not hiring Blacks in corporate America and a lot of Black people were going into teaching and into social work. There weren't as many Black people going into the medical profession or law schools, and in many instances, the Blacks who did go into those professions attended Historically Black Colleges.

[00:15:58] I graduated from high school in 1965, and that was a very pivotal year. One of my most memorable experiences in high school had to do with a Friday morning during an assembly, where we received news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, Texas. That was a very dramatic experience for us because

we had we had an affection for President Kennedy based upon his charisma and the things that he said more so than the things that he did—paying lip service to and being forced to do things as it related to the issue of discrimination in the South, specifically involving Black people, integrating schools and the like. But that's one of the things that I remember, very much so.

[00:17:06] In 1965, I can also remember this, and this was something that probably is a defining moment. I can remember there were demonstrations protesting the war in Vietnam. One of my favorite classes when I was in high school was I guess you would call it civics. I'm trying to think of specifically the term of the class, but it was a civics class. American government was the class, and I did well in that class. I guess it was because I was interested in issues concerning politics and so forth. I can remember so well buying into the propaganda about if we did not win the war in Vietnam, how communism would spread all over the world, and all of this nonsense, but this is what I was hearing on television and so on.

[00:18:19] Interestingly enough, by the time I got to college—and I'll go into specifically where I was in college at the time—but by the time I got to college, my attitude about the Vietnam War had changed significantly. One of the reasons why it had is because I had friends I'd had growing up, who I went to high school with, who came back in body bags, and kids who were very popular in school, and who did not go to college because they couldn't afford to or they weren't prepared, who went into the military, in some instances, to acquire a college education, and who did not come back. I remember the Vietnam Day committee and all of the actions that were taken at the induction centers and all of that sort of thing.

[00:19:14] But to go back to my high school years, I would say that like a lot of Black working-class youth, who did not realize or tap into their full potential for any of a number of reasons. I can remember a close friend of mine, whose father was a superintendent of a local steel company in Emeryville—which was rather remarkable—and he was an only child. And I can remember, in the ninth grade—we called it junior high school, we didn't have middle school, we had junior high and then high school—he had a tutor for algebra. I didn't even know what a tutor was until he told me what it was. That was before my father was on the waterfront, so that let me know about income and opportunity.

[00:20:25] Math was a challenging course for me, as it was for any number of children, but not understanding that if your parents were able to afford to get you a tutor, you were able to receive the necessary assistance that was necessary to get through the course, rather than just relying on the teacher. I would say that I wanted to go to college. I had ambitions. I had relatives who had graduated from college in the family. Not many, but there were some.

[00:20:57] Education was always stressed by my mother and my father. My father graduated from high school and he attended San Jose State College. He could type very well, he could sing, he could play the piano and the saxophone. He was a Renaissance man [laughing] and he stressed education a lot to me. But growing up, there were distractions. I was an athlete. I played basketball in high school. I played baseball as well. Swimming. I was a musician. I played the saxophone. I had a lot of things going on in my life and not really allowing me to focus on any one thing specifically.

[00:21:55] But I had a lot of ambition and drive, so when I graduated from high school, I attended San Francisco City College, as opposed to going to Merritt College in Oakland. Back in those days, they had what they call the master plan of higher education for people in the state of California, and it really was class-based to a great degree. If you were part of the bourgeoisie, or the upper middle class or rich, your children were on track to attend the University of California, UCLA, Stanford, Harvard, Yale, the Ivy League, those kinds of

schools. If you were middle class, you were more than likely on track to go to the state colleges—San Francisco State, Cal State Hayward, that sort of thing. And if you were in the working class, unless you were a self starter and exceptional—I say that because we didn't always get the kind of what I would call guidance about going to college—a lot of Black youngsters and working-class children were pushed into the vocational education ranks, and I can remember how my mother wanted to make sure that I was able to take college prep courses.

[00:23:26] In looking back on that now, Harvey, I can see that going into the vocational education classes in and of itself wasn't so bad because it prepared you for life after school. Some people wanted it. Some people went into the building trades. I remember taking wood shop and metal shop when I was a junior in high school. That was a requirement. I don't care if you were in college prep classes, you had to take wood shop, and you had to take metal shop. But my parents wanted to make sure that the opportunity was afforded to me to be able to take college prep classes.

[00:24:12] But let me just say this, the working-class kids were pretty much programmed to go into community colleges. I can remember it so well. Kids went to community colleges because they couldn't afford to go to four-year institutions, and I can tell you right now, it was like $48 a semester at San Francisco State when I attended there some fifty-five years ago, compared to what it is now. But a lot of working-class kids could not get into Berkeley, maybe because of grades, but other matters. In terms of finances, they may have had to work and things like that. So, we went to community colleges, and we had some of the best community colleges in the country in California, and it didn't cost us a dime. We could go for free, so I attended City College of San Francisco.

[00:25:12] I thought it would be better for me to get away from my friends and get a new start, and it was very, very much helpful. I expanded my horizons, you could say. I met guys who had been in the military and had gone back to school, some who were married, and they all had a reason for being there. It was a positive peer group for me. And I was taking UC parallel courses in my first year. Everybody who was in those classes wanted to go to Berkeley, and the professors who were teaching wanted to be there, too. Very, very rigorous.

[00:25:58] I had a very difficult time my first semester. I took a semester off and I worked at a steel mill in Emeryville, California. It was called [?Chain?] Steel, and I made reference to that earlier about this friend of mine, whose father was the superintendent. He did not graduate from high school, but he was able to do math in his head. He worked at this company. It was really remarkable. He was the one who ran the plant. I worked for him for about one semester.

[00:26:39] My father thought that I would not go back to school, but I did because I didn't want to work in the steel mill all my life. It was interesting choice, but I didn't want to. I can also remember a very important lesson that my mother taught me, and that was the idea of paying rent. [laughing] I'll never forget. I must have gotten about three or four paychecks and she sat me down and had a conversation with me. One of the things that was remarkable about it was my mother's approach, her tone with me. It was very adult. She told me that she wanted 15 percent of what I made every week and I asked her why. I was bringing home a paycheck every week, still working for the steel company.

[00:27:31] She said, "Well, son, wherever you go in this life, you're going to have to pay rent or a mortgage." And so, I did. I was making about $110 a week. I was giving her $15 a week and I couldn't figure out "Why do I have to pay you this money when I'm living here for free?" I learned that lesson.

[00:27:51] I went back to school. I worked for the Oakland Recreation Department while I was in school part-time, and then full-time during the summer working in a predominantly African American community with children. That was one of the careers that was open to Blacks back in the day, working for the Recreation Department, social work.

[00:28:20] So many Black folks who had degrees worked in the post office, and earlier than that, they worked as Pullman car porters, men who had degrees. It might have been in chemistry, math, science, business administration, and they wound up working as a porter. And that was an opportunity for Black men to travel. They were able to keep their tips, which in some ways was quite lucrative during that time. They were men who were very urbane. All of that benefited them in terms of their interaction with the ruling class and white privilege individuals who were on those trains.

[00:29:14] I say that because a number of those men were able to learn a great deal about investing in real estate and stocks, because in those days, the Black people who were in servant positions were ignored, and people would hold conversations in front of them as if they weren't even in the room. A number of those men were those that I would say made up the so-called Black middle class, aside from those individuals who were the doctors and the lawyers and undertakers and so forth. They were supplanted by the longshore workers later, which we'll get to.

[00:30:08] **HARVEY:** Did your dad get his A card in the ILWU at that point, in 1963?

[00:30:18] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, he came in in 1963. Things were pretty tough during that time. Work was slow. He wound up doing a lot of coffee work, working coffee and hides. To be quite honest about it, I really didn't derive the benefits of my father being a longshore worker. He became an A man. He started out as a B man. He became an A man in 1967.

[00:30:57] About that time, I was pretty much out of the house. He really struggled during those days. I had a chance to meet a lot of the guys that were a part of his group that he came in with. But my dad wanted to be a longshoreman going back to 1959, and he did not get picked then. I always wondered how our lives would have been different had he gone in in 1959. But my father understood that that was the best job for a working man because of the flexibility that it provided to a worker.

[00:31:46] Also, my father had faced a certain amount of discrimination when he was in the Postal Service. He was not reluctant at all to demand his rights and to go to the EEOC if there was a problem. He was that kind of a guy. He was a fella who was militant, and he understood his rights. He never did run for office at Local 10 of the ILWU. He was never an officeholder, but he was a guy that his coworkers respected and looked to. He was a very literate man. He went to union meetings, but he never did seek office.

[00:32:49] **HARVEY:** Was he politically active in any political party? Or was your mother, either, for that matter?

[00:32:54] **CLARENCE:** My mother was, yes. My mother, I had mentioned, was in this West Oakland Negro Democratic Club. It was a small club of Blacks—they were called Negroes in those days. It was Black women who were politically active in the Democratic Party. I would say that she's always been political. My father, too.

I just remember my mother because of the fact that she was a housewife, as they used to call them. She was home a lot, but she was involved.

[00:33:34] The home that my parents bought in North Oakland in 1956 was located right across the street from Santa Fe School, so my mother knew my teachers, she knew who the principal and the vice principal were. She was active in the community, and if I acted up, there was a phone call made to the house. [laughing] But she had more flexibility because my dad was working.

[00:34:06] He was active in the church. I don't remember any political organizations as such, other than the union, and that was pretty much going to union meetings, voting. I do think it's important to say that my father was a part of a very significant lawsuit that happened while he was on the waterfront. It was called the Squire Scott [vs. Pacific Maritime Association] case, and what it had to do with concerned the ability of Local 10 members being able to transfer into the clerks, and he was a part of that lawsuit.

[00:34:52] I always like to put it this way. They lost the battle, but they won the war, meaning that they did not win the lawsuit as such, because that did not happen. What happened was eventually, Local 10 and Local 34, all of the locals—I should say it was a caucus decision that everyone who would come into the clerks would come through the longshore locals first, unless their parents had come directly into the union. Then they could come in as B people, but that changed later. It was the so-called one-door policy.

[00:35:42] I can remember so vividly going to Federal court with my father. And—you'll laugh at this—I met Jimmy Herman in the men's room [laughing] at the Federal Building. Judge [Robert F.] Peckham, a very liberal Federal judge, presided over that case. My father, it wasn't personal to him. It was politics. He wanted to become a clerk and there were some barriers that were happening. It was very well known that there was a lot of discrimination in the clerks.

[00:36:14] **HARVEY:** That was before Jimmy.

[00:36:18] **CLARENCE:** I'm glad you mentioned that. When Jimmy Herman came in—and I can tell you, people like brother Alex Bagwell, who recently passed away—was one of the first Blacks to come in. Fred Franklin, whose dad was Odell Franklin in Local 10, he came in. A community activist by the name of Paul Carr. He came in as a clerk, too, although he didn't stay with it. His dad was a member of the ILWU. He lived in West Oakland. That was, I think, the first group of Blacks that they brought in under Herman's leadership in the 60s. So, that's how my father rolled, as the young people would say.

[00:37:21] **HARVEY:** Did he become a clerk at some point?

[00:37:23] **CLARENCE:** No, he did not become a clerk, but a lot of his friends did. My dad passed away from a massive heart attack in 1985. I always tell people I came into the ILWU the hard way, through the Permissive [Rule] . But one thing I need to say, Harvey. I applied to be a longshore worker in 1969, and there were a number of us from State colleges who applied to be longshore workers. This is during the height of the Vietnam War. I did not get hired, and I think my father had mixed feelings about me becoming a longshore worker back then. He wanted me to get my college education, which I did.

[00:38:14] But I think it might have had to do with he didn't want me to be subjected to some of the things that longshore workers were subjected to back in those days—their exposure to things such as asbestos—and the

dangers. They were still doing a lot of hand jive—coal work—and some of that was happening when I came in. But let me go back to my college days.

[00:38:58] **HARVEY:** You go from City College to San Francisco State. About what point in time?

[00:39:06] **CLARENCE:** It's interesting, Harvey. After I did that semester working in the steel mill, I went back to the City College of San Francisco, and it was quite different. I was a little bit more serious. I did okay, and then I decided—and I don't know why I did this because it might have seemed to be a silly move at the time—but for whatever reason, I decided that I was going to leave City College of San Francisco and pay for my tuition at San Francisco State Extension. I guess, for whatever reason, I kind of thought that if I started attending San Francisco State Extension, it was going to make it easier for me to get into San Francisco State College. That wasn't necessary, but that was how my brain was functioning.

[00:40:10] It was on Powell Street, right at the steep end of the hill on Powell. [laughing] Quite a trek every day. I went there, and I was continuing to work at the Recreation Department and go to school. I was a lot more serious about school at that point. I was paying, so I was a lot more serious. I took my education much more seriously. I paid more attention to how I prepared for class and that sort of thing.

[00:40:43] That's when Danny Glover and I became familiar with one another, because he was at State Extension as well. We were also at State and City College, and I used to see him around and talk. We had heard about this special admissions program that San Francisco State College was going to be engaged in. This was being initiated by the San Francisco State College Black Student Union.

[00:41:20] **HARVEY:** Can I ask you what year this is?

[00:41:26] **CLARENCE:** This was 1966. I started at State College in September of 1967, so this was 66-67. We had heard some things through the grapevine, and then things became much more clear because the Black Student Union started to have community meetings. They started to let people know that they were going to be bringing what they call—this was the precursor to the Education Opportunity Program, otherwise known as ELP.

[00:42:11] What we found out was that at colleges and universities—and specifically at State College—the president and other professors had certain kinds of prerogatives about getting people into the institution who did not meet certain qualifications, so certain things were waived. In my instance, after that first year, I had some grades that were low. I was able to return to school, but I wasn't on the dean's list or anything like that.

[00:42:56] The interesting thing about the Black Student Union is that their message was, we're interested in bringing Black students onto the campus who are committed to using their education in some way to benefit the community, and I thought I was one of those individuals that they were talking about.

[00:43:18] There was a sign-up list, and then what happened was we started to get these letters with the Black Student Union letterhead telling us that they would like for us to start attending some summer seminars. We would go to these seminars and they would have various speakers there who were affiliated with the organization.

[00:43:40] Then they started to give us this list of books to read, books like Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth; The Black Bourgeoisie by Franklin Frazier; The Autobiography of Malcolm X; Black Anglo-Saxons by Dr. Nathan Hare, and so forth. We were told to read these books, and I guess this was a way to find out how serious we were about getting into school.

[00:44:13] The remarkable thing about the Black Student Union was I encountered young Black people, men and women, who seemed to be in the tradition and the mode of people like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and others who were part of SNCC, but they were at a predominantly white school in California.

[00:44:43] The Black Student Union was an organization that was highly sophisticated. It was an organization led by people who had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the South, people like Jimmy Garrett, who was now Doc Garrett, as we called him—he's a lawyer and a PhD—and he had been the chairman of the Black Student Union.

[00:45:07] One thing about State College that was so different from the University of California, a lot of the students there were people who had been in the service. They had worked, gone back to school. Very serious-minded people, very serious-minded. You didn't run into Joe College types. You ran into people who were very ambitious, didn't have a lot of time to waste.

[00:45:32] And there were things happening at the college that were highly political, such as getting ROTC off campus; a draft counseling office; a Center for Education Innovation, which was about seeking funds from the Carnegie and various other foundations to fund programs such as the Black Studies curriculum at San Francisco State, which was the precursor to the Black Studies Department.

[00:46:06] So, I went through all of the program. I went to the meetings. I was very serious. But one of the most remarkable things that happened, Harvey, was this. There had been some promises made by the administration that they didn't want to live up to in terms of the number of people that they wanted to admit. This was called the Special Admissions Admittance Program, which I mentioned was the precursor to the Educational Opportunity Program, and I think we can draw an analogy between the program started by the Black Student Union and breakfast for children program started by the Black Panther Party, in this regard.

[00:46:57] That breakfast for children program served as a model for the Federal Government's program for food and breakfast and lunch programs for children who were poor and working class, whose parents were not able to provide those meals. I'm going to elaborate on that a little bit more later. But here's what happened.

[00:47:24] The State College administrators said, "Well, we're not going to be able to live up to our obligations." So, the leadership of the Black Student Union got on the phone and called us or sent letters telling us that they were giving us bad news, but their thing was, "We want you to attend a meeting with the Dean of Academic Affairs on such and such a date, and to be on campus at such and such a time." We said, "Okay." They explained to us that they thought that our presence at the meeting would be very influential in terms of letting those administrators have to face us and tell us no, we couldn't come in.

[00:48:16] That was the first time that I ever saw young, Black people—men in particular—who were able to use, for lack of a better term, the King's English, to be able to challenge PhDs and administrators without having to curse them out [laughing] and use street vernacular to get their point across, and to see them

challenge, to see their faces turn red, and be embarrassed by these young people, who were in the tradition of Malcolm X.

[00:48:58] These were young people that were very serious. They were very involved in student government. They knew professors by their first names, and professors knew of them and respected them and sat on committees with those individuals.

[00:49:14] We were there in the room, and the administrators had to go out and get extra chairs to accommodate everybody when we sat down. And believe me, that was a power dynamic that I saw played out right before my very eyes, and I said, wow, these young people really have power. And we got into school. I felt a deep obligation to that organization because I would have eventually got into San Francisco State, but it would have taken me a much longer period of time.

[00:49:49] **HARVEY:** Were you in the Black Panthers at that point yourself?

[00:49:51] **CLARENCE:** The Black Panther Party participation, Harvey, started after I got to San Francisco State, and that was because of my first wife. She's Judy Juanita now. She's a well-known writer. Her first novel was Virgin Soul. It's fiction, but it's based upon her life, growing up in Oakland and attending Merritt College, and being at Merritt College at the same time as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Bobby Seale was the chairman of the Black Panther Party. Huey was the minister of defense for the Black Panther Party.

[00:50:34] **HARVEY:** How about showing picture four, because Bobby Seale is in the picture.

[00:50:40] **CLARENCE:** Bobby Seale was in the picture, yes.

[00:50:43] **HARVEY:** Should we show picture number four?

[00:50:52] **CLARENCE:** Yes. "Justice for Oscar Grant." Bobby Seale was at that particular rally in Oakland in 2010. The photograph above that, "Black Strike Shut It Down," the fellow in the fur-lined, collared coat—my head is turned to the left. Go over to the right. One more time. Right there. That's me. That's Clarence. Go to the left. Right there. That's Clarence Thomas, and I'm on the picket line at the strike.

[00:51:39] **HARVEY:** You're pretty young there, aren't you? Yeah, yeah, you look young.

[00:51:42] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, that is me. Some of the folks in that "Black Strike, Shut It Down" photo are gone now. We recently celebrated the 55th anniversary of the San Francisco State strike and several people on here are gone now.

[00:52:12] My wife was very active in the party, as a writer. I got involved, too, especially during the time when Huey Newton had just been arrested for killing a police officer in Oakland. I was involved in raising funds for the party.

[00:52:37] My parents allowed their home to be used for community meetings for the party. My sisters—I have twin sisters who are three years younger than me—were involved with the party and community meetings. I remember doing community control of police petitions in Berkeley, and a woman said, "Young man, I'm going

to sign this petition for one reason, if you would agree to be a police officer. We need men like you to be in the police department." [laughing] I'll never forget that.

[00:53:15] But I was very active. I'm going to share a couple of stories about my involvement with the party. It was in 1967 or early 68. There was a Huey Newton birthday party fundraiser at the Oakland Auditorium, and it was quite a star-studded event.

[00:53:42] They had Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Ture] , I believe. H. Rap Brown [Jamil al-Amin] , who was under house arrest, left New York. Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions. Curtis Mayfield was a very popular singer who sang songs that reflected the struggle, like People Get Ready, there's a train a-comin and Move On Up—very inspirational songs to Black people that reflected the movement.

[00:54:13] He was there. Ron Dellums from Berkeley, who was the city councilman, was there. And Clarence Thomas was in a ticket booth with a nine millimeter pistol and a long black leather jacket. They trusted me to be with the money. [laughing] I didn't see any of the activities that happened, but that's one of my stories about my involvement in the past. I don't like to overstate my participation, but I was involved.

[00:54:46] I learned a great deal from being involved with the Black Panther Party. First of all, one of the things I learned was about grassroots organizing. I learned about the importance of political education. I learned how to write, of course, but I had competing interests, and that was my participation at San Francisco State in the Black Student Union. That took priority for me. I guess it did because I was a student there. But, yes, I was in the Panthers and the Black Student Union. And I was in the Black Student Union leadership. It was called the Central Committee of the Black Student Union.

[00:55:36] But one of the most impactful moments of my life, Harvey, as a student at San Francisco State, took place on November 6, 1967. As I mentioned, the Black Student Union, along with other progressive student elements at San Francisco State, were seeking funding from various foundations for the purpose of funding programs. State had some outstanding programs. They had one of the best tutorial programs in the country, made up of Black, white and Latino students who were going into the community—be it Bayview, Hunters Point, Fillmore—and working with young people, tutoring them, getting them prepared for college.

[00:56:33] Let me just tell you this very quickly. The newspaper at San Francisco State was called The [Daily] Gater. The editor was a guy by the name of Jim Vaszko. There had been some resentment on the part of some white students to the emerging political stature of Black students on campus. They resented Black students being in certain positions, getting funding for the Black Student Union, all this kind of thing. They resented it.

[00:57:11] But what Vaszko did was to write an op-ed piece. What he was attempting to do was to undermine the ability of the Black Student Union to get funding for this program, such as the Black Studies curriculum. So, a group of us were called in a meeting, and said, "We're going to go up to The Gater office and we're going to confront them about this B.S. that they're doing to undermine our ability to get these funds." It was a very racist thing that they were doing, so we went up there.

[00:57:47] I guess in the back of my mind, I realized that something could happen. Just the mere fact that Black male students were going up to The Gater, just our presence there, was going to be intimidating. One thing led to another, and fisticuffs ensued. And to show you how unsophisticated I was, there used to be a San Francisco Chronicle and a San Francisco Examiner—two newspapers in San Francisco—if you remember, Harvey—and by the time that I got home, I was on the front page, I guess, of the Examiner, or the Chronicle—one of the

two—throwing a punch. [laughing] You really couldn't see my face that well, but I knew who it was. You couldn't see my face, but I knew it was me.

[00:58:49] Anyway, we got off the campus, and it was a real big deal. But suffice it to say that after all of this unfolded, we were summarily dismissed—I think John Summerskill was the president at that time of San Francisco State—and they got no due process.

[00:59:14] HARVEY: Make it clear that you were dismissed from school, kicked out of school.

[00:59:18] I was dismissed from school, yeah. They put us out. We were expelled. We were out. No suspension.

[00:59:27] The students were upset. First of all, they were upset about The Gater doing this, like "How dare they?" And we didn't really intend to hurt anybody, but things happened. What happened, Harvey, was there was a groundswell of support for us. A man that I had heard of, but didn't know very well, and who was an alumnus of San Francisco State, by the name of Willie Lewis Brown, represented us, those of us who were part of The Gater incident, and he kept us from going to jail for a long time. We must have spent maybe an hour or two in jail when we turned ourselves in, and we wound up getting probation. We were very, very lucky. We were very lucky that we got probation and walked away from that.

[01:00:37] But I never will forget my father. My father was a political guy. He says, "I understand what happened and why it happened, but I just don't understand why that had to be you, because you just got started there." [laughing] My father, he was a very pragmatic guy. The only thing I could tell my father was that it was the Black Student Union that was responsible for me being on that campus, and I felt I couldn't not go up there. That would have been like punking out, and I wasn't going to do that. Although at the same time, too, I wasn't thinking of hurting anybody when I went up there.

[01:01:26] Vaszko was shaken up pretty good, but none of us went to prison on that beef. We could have. But there was an outgrowth of support. They had to shut the campus down to have a colloquium, and things started happening.

[01:01:42] And I'm mentioning all of this because this preceded the San Francisco State strike by one year, and I think that that was so critical in terms of the political. Now, one of the things that I learned was the importance of understanding political consequences. When you do things, they have consequences. There are risks.

[01:02:09] I learned about loyalty and unity, and I also began to understand coalitions. I wasn't expecting to see a lot of white students who were also supportive of us. We had white students who were resentful and they didn't like what was going on with the Black Student Union, but there were others who did, and were supportive of us, and who said, "Hey, this is a violation of due process. You can't kick these students out like this. They haven't even had a hearing."

[01:02:41] There was a groundswell of support and most of us got back into school. One student I remember, I think he got deported. He was from Trinidad. But suffice it to say, we got back into school. By that time, I was a really serious student. After being practically thrown out, I was very, very serious about my classes and my whole approach to learning.

[01:03:08] The San Francisco State strike, Harvey, was probably one of the most important events in my life, aside from having my son and becoming a member of ILWU Local 10. It's right up there at the top because that's when I really got my experience. And even though I was a history major, Harvey, I really didn't equate or understand the Great Strike of 1934. I wasn't a Labor Studies guy. I couldn't put those two things together in terms of San Francisco—the Great Strike, the West Coast Strike—and this 1968 strike at San Francisco State, which lasted some four and a half months.

[01:03:58] But I was a part of that in a very real way because I was what they called the student coordinator of the Black Studies curriculum, so we got the funding. I believe it was Carnegie, if I'm not mistaken. We got the funding. And what happened was that funding allowed for there to be an increase in the number of Black Studies courses. Black psychology, journalism, Swahili, politics, literature—these were some of the classes that were offered, and in many instances, they were taught by students who had graduated and had degrees, working on their masters and PhD programs and so forth. The idea for the Black Studies Department in the School of Ethnic Studies was formulated based on that curriculum.

[01:05:07] I was on the Central Committee of the Black Student Union. That was the group that led the San Francisco State strike. I know you don't like people to do this, Harvey, but I just have to say this very quickly.

[01:05:28] "One of the most effective confrontations in the history of the United States student movement, the San Francisco State strike will no doubt serve as a precedent for future campus disruption. The strike has been unique in many ways, different completely from the events at Columbia University in 1968, or the recent disruptions at Cornell and Harvard. The San Francisco State College strike witnessed the formation of new alliances, the use of new tactics, the mobilization of unprecedented support. The effectiveness of the strike can be attributed primarily to the leadership of the Black Student Union."

[01:06:07] This is not an excerpt from a radical journal or a left-wing magazine. This is excerpted from the Riot, Civil and Criminal Disorder Hearings before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, 91st Congress, First Session, Part 22, page 571.

[01:06:34] I like to read that for people because I tell young people in particular, "You really can find out how serious the State takes your movement by the way that they characterize and evaluate it." This came out in a public forum. But so much of what I learned at San Francisco State during that strike, I have been able to utilize in my years in the ILWU.

[01:07:07] It's important for me to say that the American Federation of Teachers also went out on strike in 1968, and they got strikes sanctioned from the Labor Councils, and ILWU, Local 10, Local 6, had people come out on the picket line and march with us—Curtis McLean, and others.

[01:07:33] The other thing was the ILWU Local 10 allowed extra longshore jobs, casual jobs, to be utilized by faculty and students who were on strike during that time. Danny Glover was one of the people who worked on the docks at that time. Steve Zeltzer, who has a Labor Video Project, who was at State at that time also, and a number of other people. I didn't. I had student loans, I guess, or something else keeping me going at that time. I never did it.

[01:08:12] But one of the most remarkable things was during the strike negotiations, none other than William "Bill" Chester had been selected by Mayor Joseph Alioto to be a part of that select committee to negotiate the settlement of the strike. Who would have thunk it, Harvey?

[01:08:38] That strike was remarkable in so many ways. First of all, Harvey, we had to go up against the Board of Trustees, Ronald Reagan, the City of San Francisco, the San Francisco Tac Squad, which was like the precursor for the SWAT with the shield on. They came out beating heads.

[01:09:09] The San Francisco State strike started out as a guerrilla movement. We actually disrupted classes. I remember going to classes and disrupting classes. People were like, "What're you doing?" No, there is no class today. Classes are shut down."

[01:09:27] We had certain demands, Harvey. We wanted Dr. Nathan Hare, who we had recruited from Howard University, to be the chairman of the department. George Mason Murray, who was the Minister of Education for the Black Panther Party, we wanted him to get his job back and to be a professor. We wanted a Black Studies Department and a School of Ethnic Studies. Both of those things still stand today.

[01:09:57] But one of the most important parts of that is that we wanted to have something like open enrollment for students. That's what led to the enhancement of the special admissions or the Educational Opportunity Program, where the State basically responded to one of our demands about having more Black and brown students on campus commensurate with the community of San Francisco. They said, "Okay, what we're going to do is set up a formal program, starting in high schools, to be able to track students who are interested so that they get the financial and tutorial support." That came out of the San Francisco State strike.

[01:10:47] The San Francisco State strike was a revolutionary movement, and we know that to be the case by what I just read, what the Feds said about us. Not only that, Harvey, it also gave young people—like Danny Glover, myself and so many, many others—the idea that we could take on the State, and we could win.

[01:11:15] A lot of folks who attended San Francisco State College were not in the leadership of the Black Student Union, or the Third World Liberation Front, which was an organization that developed subsequent to the BSU made up of students from the Asian community, Mexican American community, the Filipino community, all of these various groups.

[01:11:40] And one of the things that we made sure that the administration didn't do was to make us fight amongst each other. When the Mexican Americans students said, "We want to bring in more Mexican Americans," they said, "You've got to go talk to the Black Student Union about giving up part of the pie. We said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, it don't go like that. They get their own pie. That's how this works." [laughing]

[01:12:11] So, the Third World Liberation Front had its five demands. We started out with 10, and then they added five, so there was a total of 15 demands. We couldn't have done the strike without the Third World students. For that matter, SDS and the white radical students, too, played a very important role.

[01:12:30] It was through coalition building and, I must say, the community. We had the support of people like Dr. Carlton Goodlett, who was the publisher of the Sun-Reporter newspaper, who had been a lefty when he was

a young man. He's one of the first Blacks to get a PhD out of Berkeley and then subsequently, got his MD from an Historically Black College.

[01:13:00] People like Ron Dellums, who was a graduate of San Francisco State in the early 60s. Willie Brown. There were other folks that I can remember. Revels Caton, who has such a reputation as a leftist and a progressive inside of the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. There were others who were in the community. Willie Brown, I mentioned him. Also, Reverend Cecil Williams, who had been recently brought out to California to head Glide Memorial Church. These were some of the people that were very supportive of the San Francisco State strike, and they came out to the campus and they marched with us.

[01:14:01] There was a point of view that one of the reasons why there weren't any students killed at San Francisco State like they were at Kent State and at Jackson State, I believe, was because of the fact that we had such community support, even from the ILWU, too, and that required the City of San Francisco and the cops to put the brakes on things. I think that it was very important that our elders supported us and they respected us. We had our disagreements, but they knew that we were committed to those demands and they worked with us.

[01:14:51] We had an off-campus center, Harvey, that we had set up in the Fillmore, with programs. We were in the community, and we had community meetings. I remember so well going to meetings at the Sun-Reporter building, that sort of thing. Some of those photographs that you showed were people who were very active in the San Francisco State strike.

[01:15:17] **HARVEY:** Was LeRoy King involved at all?

[01:15:19] **CLARENCE:** I don't remember LeRoy King as such. I don't remember, but that's not to say that he wasn't. But I know that Curtis McLean [was there] because I've seen old videos of people who were there. I can't remember. He may very well have been there because, I have to tell you, at that point, my understanding of the ILWU as such was more on the periphery because that just wasn't my focus.

[01:15:56] One of the reasons why is because when you're that age—I had been exposed to such things, as I mentioned, reading Wretched of the Earth by Dr. Frantz Fanon, who was a psychiatrist that had served revolutionaries in Algeria. I was being exposed to the writings of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong and a lot.

[01:16:27] So, there was a great deal of romanticism, and trying to put together those struggles that were going on to our struggle going on here, and so a lot of the labor stuff, I just wasn't all that acquainted with, and wasn't paying as much attention to as maybe some others were. But it's just so remarkable to see that the institution that I became a part of for over 30 years was one that was on the front lines with the San Francisco State [Strike] .

[01:17:04] **HARVEY:** Yeah, and I think Chester was more involved than is obvious.

[01:17:10] **CLARENCE:** Chester was more involved because of the role that he played in the Civil Rights Movement in the Bay Area. Chester was on that BART Commission, I believe, at one point. He was Harry's go-to guy when he wanted something done, and he was a guy that was very well respected in so many sectors of the community. We will get to that when we begin to talk about the time 1967 when we were doing The Gater incident, and then 1967 in September, when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King comes to San Francisco and speaks at Local 10. He had come to the Bay Area specifically for this fundraiser for SCLC [Southern Christian

Leadership Council] at the Oakland Coliseum with Harry Belafonte and Joan Baez and all of this stuff, but he said he could not come to the Bay Area and not speak at Local 10. This is the same year that Cleophas [Williams] is elected president, so it's interesting to see things that are happening in 1967, and you look back on that now and say, wow, all these things happening at the same time.

[01:18:38] But anyway, Harvey, we get these demands. Some of the things we wanted, we don't get. We don't get Dr. Hare. He's too revolutionary, he's too radical. He's too close to the students.

[01:18:50] What we get is the emergence of S. I. Hayakawa, who was the President of San Francisco State, who goes on to become a U.S. Senator. He made his reputation at San Francisco State.

[01:19:07] Then we get the emergence of Ronald Reagan. He uses the struggle at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley for change and all this stuff. He eventually becomes President of the United States.

[01:19:21] So, this is a very important period.

[01:19:26] **HARVEY:** Did you meet Hayakawa?

[01:19:28] **CLARENCE:** I've been in his presence. At one time he was a liberal guy, and all of that changed. Because Hayakawa was actually very entrenched in terms of being a reactionary, and challenging.

[01:19:51] Some of the other presidents of the school there, besides Summerskill, I think, Robert Smith and others, were much more accommodating to the students. That was because they were academicians, and they understood their role as academicians to make sure that certain things took place, like due process. We can't allow free speech to be challenged. So, they really had to be told, "Hey, listen, later for that. Later for free speech. We've got to shut this down," because they understood what the ramifications were of our demands and the changes that we were making at that school.

[01:20:46] So, we see the proliferation of Black Studies departments all across the country, and educational opportunity programs up and down, which are universities now—San Francisco State University is what it is now. So, being able to be part of that.

[01:21:10] Then I became on the Dean's list because I was much more serious as a student, and I understood the importance of sitting in the front of the classroom and making my presence known to the professors, having conversations with them, and talking with them and letting them know that I was interested in doing well in the classroom. And they knew who I was, probably for political reasons as well.

[01:21:38] But I was a lot more serious as a student following that experience, and when I graduated, I applied to Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. It's now UC College of Law in San Francisco. I think they took the Hastings name out of it, for reasons that have to do with his political character.

[01:22:12] **HARVEY:** That's very polite regarding Mr. Hastings.

[01:22:15] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, yeah. [laughing] We were sort of naive—when I say "we"—because there were more than several members of the Black Student Union Central Committee who all applied to Hastings at the

same time. We should have known. At Hastings, at that time, they used to say, "In your first year, look to the left, look to the right. One of you is not going to be here next year."

[01:22:47] You had to be retired to be hired. They had all of the luminaries. Professor Prosser, who was an expert on torts. You had Rolland Perkins, who was an expert on criminal law. These are men who were teaching at Hastings when I was there.

[01:23:09] I got through the first year—barely. [laughing] By the second semester, I was out. Some people had to repeat their first year over again. Some people got passed and went to probation. But they eliminated a lot of us, one by one. I think we were probably naive to think that we were all going to get through there.

[01:23:38] Law school is very political. It is. Although I would say that had I gone to school and gotten a master's degree first, it might have been a little bit more helpful. And probably had I not gone to Hastings—if I had gone to Georgetown or someplace else—I probably would have had a much easier time in terms of the politics. I've always had thoughts about not completing my legal education, but I learned a great deal from my experience there.

[01:24:14] That's what led me, Harvey, to going to the East Coast because I was attempting to complete my legal education at Howard University, and I had a connection with someone who had graduated from the school. He put me in touch with a professor there. Unfortunately, the professor died—he committed suicide—and I wasn't able to—but that led me to going back to the East Coast.

[01:24:49] I was married. My first wife was Judy Hart. She was a known poet in the Bay Area. She eventually went on to become the editor of the Black Panther Party newspaper when Huey Newton was incarcerated. At San Francisco State, she was the Black journalism professor. The newspaper that was published was called Black Fire, and it was a damn good newspaper.

[01:25:31] We had a son. I went back to Howard to try to get back into school. That fell through, and I didn't want to come back to the Bay Area. There were a number of reasons why I didn't want to come back. I thought that while I'm here, I should try to make a go of this.

[01:25:59] I wound up getting a job working for the City of Newark in Newark, New Jersey. The first Black mayor of an Eastern city was a man by the name of Kenneth Gibson. I think before he was elected, there was a mayor elected in Cleveland, whose name I can't remember right off the top of my head, but later, it was Kenneth Gibson. Hugh Addonizio had been his predecessor, and Addonizio had been indicted for corruption.

[01:26:39] My cousin, who had been living in New Brunswick, New Jersey, put me in contact with someone who had graduated from San Francisco State who was a few years ahead of me, and they worked for the City of Newark. She said, "Oh, they're going to love you. You can do so many things."

[01:26:58] They hired me, and I was in what they called the Model Cities Program. For those who are too young to remember what that was, these were Federal monies that were appropriated to the cities. They were part of the Johnson administration's Great Society programs.

[01:27:21] These monies would come into the cities and the smart mayors would use these funds to do things that the city funds couldn't do. They had programs dealing with such things as providing opportunities for

welfare mothers; providing people in the community with the skillset to begin to organize and to make change in their community. Very hands-on stuff, and stuff that worked. It also taught people how to navigate the municipal government, to get things done. You saw an emergence of a political class grow out of this.

[01:28:12] I was there for a number of years and did a variety of things. While I was there, I became more familiar with a man formerly known as Leroy Jones, who was a noted poet and writer. He went on to become Amiri Baraka. He played a very important role in getting votes for Mayor Gibson.

[01:28:51] I was there for a number of years. I did a lot of things. I was sort of able to reinvent myself. I think that's what I can say, Harvey. [laughing] I reinvented myself while I was there using the experience—Go ahead, Harvey.

[01:29:09] **HARVEY:** What was your job title, if you remember?

[01:29:12] **CLARENCE:** My first job title was planning specialist. This was before the advent of computers as such. I was the guy that was just the board, and they had these modules. These modules represented activities and goals and objectives that certain departments in the city was to accomplish. My responsibility was to lay out all of these things on this board so people could see that.

[01:29:48] Then I would interface with these various programs. I was monitoring and evaluating the programs that they were doing. It was really good stuff. I was using my writing skills, my organizing skills. And being an outsider, I was what I would have called an interloper if I was somebody from New York, and I knew people from New York or the East Coast that had come to Oakland that were hired on some of these positions. But I would never get hired on those jobs because my reputation preceded me. "We're not hiring him. No." [laughing] But I could get a job 3,000 miles away in Newark, New Jersey.

[01:30:42] And I learned about politics. For me, it wasn't a stretch. When the mayor had a fundraiser, or a picnic, or a whatever, you would get two tickets in your paycheck. You weren't obligated to buy those tickets, but I understood which side of the bread my bread was buttered on. I bought those tickets gladly to support the mayor. The mayor didn't have to hire me for that position. It wasn't the mayor who hired me, but it was the mayor's right hand man.

[01:31:27] I'll never forget, I had already started working, but I hadn't got my paycheck yet. The assistant business administrator called me into the office. Somebody said, "He just wants to smoke you over. He doesn't know who you are." He started to tell me that the Feds were looking at things in Newark from the old days and so forth. We had a brief conversation and I got my paycheck the next week.

[01:31:57] But I really appreciated working in municipal government, especially in a Black administration. I began to notice and have interactions with Black professionals who had gone to schools like Howard and various other Black institutions, and then had gone on to white institutions to get their master's and law degrees. These were some of the people that I was interfacing with and meeting.

[01:32:30] But then, Harvey, something very interesting happened. I started working with the program called the Minority Contractors and Craftsmen Trade Association. This was an offshoot of one of those programs that I used to monitor. Lo and behold, I got involved in a very important program, and I was the person who was responsible for implementing a city ordinance requiring that small and minority businesses had to be utilized in

the construction—what we call PG&E here in Oakland, or in the Bay Area, or the State of California. It was the public service electric and gas building in Newark. An outfit called Tishman Construction Company was the contractor. I was the guy that was responsible for making sure that they hired minority contractors.

[01:33:30] You can really see how they loved me. Not at all. [laughing] And I was really committed because I saw this as what I've been trained to do. This was all about holding those in power accountable. They wanted these contracts, they wanted all this money, and then they wanted to set up minority front organizations of contractors that really weren't doing the work, paying a few people a few dollars, and I wouldn't go for that.

[01:34:09] I did that, and I did that for a long time until they did a rope-a-dope on me, Harvey. They set me up with a job with a company—you're familiar with it—it was called the Golden Nugget. It's a casino, and they needed an affirmative action officer. I got hired for that. That was a bad, bad choice that I made because it was a setup to hire me to get me out of that position that I was doing in the City of Newark.

[01:34:55] I eventually got fired, and I didn't see it coming. But they really had somebody else who they really wanted in that role, and that was done—I look at it and to me, it was all a setup because the people who really referred me to this position were folks who were involved with Tishman Construction. [laughing] "It's a great opportunity." I just didn't see that.

[01:35:30] **HARVEY:** What year was that, Clarence?

[01:35:32] **CLARENCE:** This was in the late 70s. But I have to say one thing, though, Harvey. Even the City of Newark realized that I was a guy who took the ordinance very seriously. They knew that I wasn't someone who went with the okey-doke. I wasn't someone who people had offered money to do things. I'm just not that kind of a guy. I'm not cut out that way. I wasn't going for that, and they knew that. They said, "This guy—where is he from? Oh, shit. He was in the Panthers." And all this shit. [laughing]

[01:36:13] There were some people who did some good work there. I didn't feel like I had sold out. I felt like this is the real world. Being on the East Coast, you do real world things if you're going to be on the East Coast. I found out that I could make it there, and do things, and use all the things that I had learned along the way to be able to not only survive, but to make a contribution to the community.

[01:36:56] And I was well liked by the contractors. They all thought that I was a serious guy. They didn't trust the contractors and they shouldn't have because they were double dealing. When you're dealing with contractors, you're dealing with some people who are self-made men. When I say that, I mean they start out as contractors, as craftsmen, and they build something.

[01:37:24] Then you have an outfit like Tishman. I don't think it's as big as [audio interruption] , but it's huge, and they're used to getting their way. They know how to put on a song and a dance and wow people, and tell them all these stories and give them all these narratives.

[01:37:44] But I wound up working with people who were very serious, and they weren't as political, and they were actually interested in getting things done. They were looking to me. "Clarence, can you find me people that can do these things? I know what all the hoopla is with these guys, but I have to get this building built, so I need to be able to do certain things." That was a great experience for me.

[01:38:15] If you were to say, "What do you think your interest was back in those days, and when you were at San Francisco State College?" I would say that a lot of it would have to be defined as public affairs—communicating messages of the needs and desires of people. Expressing them in some real way. I learned later on, oh, this is really public relations. But when I found out what public relations was, I said, "No, I couldn't do that for corporations, but I can certainly do this on the basis of organizations." Being able to write, communicate.

[01:39:05] I learned about doing press releases. I learned about doing press conferences when I was at San Francisco State. I learned about how to be a public speaker. All of those things came into play when I was back East, and later on, when I was in ILWU.

[01:39:29] So, that's what led me to get back to California in the early 80s.

[01:39:41] **HARVEY:** What did you do in the early 80s when you came back to the West Coast?

[01:39:45] **CLARENCE:** Well, I guess I have to tell the truth about this. [laughing] I had a participation with corporate America for a while—the Bank of America. I was doing minority business work again. The company that I almost went to work for—and you're going to really laugh at this one—was Bechtel. At that point, my only understanding about Bechtel was that they were worldwide, and you could travel. I knew some people that had worked in purchasing, which is where I wanted to go.

[01:40:34] When my father passed away, that was a big shock. None of us knew that this was going to happen. My father had rheumatic fever as a child and it damaged his heart. There were episodes where he would have what we thought was indigestion and gas. But my father was very, very afraid of needles and doctors, and he never did have an angioplasty, I don't believe. He never had that, and that probably could have prolonged his life.

[01:41:22] He passed away at 62 in 1985. That was in February, and then in June, I was being processed to be a longshore worker in ILWU Local 10. I remember the secretary-treasurer at that time was Tom Lufer and he was the one who said, "So, you want to be a longshoreman, huh?" And I said, "Yeah, I do."

[01:42:07] I remember Eddie Gutierrez was on the Executive Board of Local 10, and Leo Robinson, and so many others. I remember going up before the Executive Board. We used to be called the "daddy's books." That's what the old-timers called us who were part of the Permissive Rule. The "daddy's book," the "daddy's boys." [laughing] We didn't particularly care for it, but I came to understand and to appreciate it. I thought it was a term of endearment, really, on their part. They could have been calling us something else. [laughing]

[01:42:49] **HARVEY:** Were you still working for the Bank of America at that time?

[01:42:53] **CLARENCE:** No, I was no longer working for the Bank of America. I started working for my uncle. My uncle had a paper company, and the paper company was called Gazelle Paper. My uncle was quite a character. He was a man who was a true entrepreneur. He had been in the liquor business, he had been in the furniture business. This was extraordinary for starting businesses. He was more of an entrepreneur than he was a businessman. But I worked for him, using my skills that I had acquired. It was a small business, but I liked working for him.

[01:43:36] Then my dad died. After that, the whole trajectory of my life changed. Suffice it to say that so much of what I had learned at San Francisco State, and what I had been a part of when working for the Kenneth Gibson administration, even the Black Panther Party—all of those experiences, I was able to utilize when I became a member of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen Union Local 10.

[01:44:13] I have to say, Harvey, that I didn't hit the ground running in terms of becoming an Executive Board member and stuff like that. I came to the meetings because I always thought that this particular environment at Local 10—specifically at Local 10, because it's a tough political environment—and I really wasn't quite sure if I wanted to be a part of that. I went to the union meetings. I voted. I paid attention. Then I became an Executive Board member.

[01:44:49] **HARVEY:** Before we go into that, let me ask a little bit more about being a longshoreman. What was your first day on the job like? Can you remember? Particularly the first day, and then after that.

[01:45:05] **CLARENCE:** What I remember about my first day on the job was that this was the most memorable day I ever worked. I was working with a guy who was a former Black Panther Party member. His name was David Hilliard. David Hiliard was the chief of staff for the Black Panther Party.

[01:45:37] When I met David in 1967, David had just become a member of the ILWU as a B man. He never did move any higher than B status because of his involvement with the Panthers, but I remember working with him. It was a steel job.

[01:46:01] That was one of my most memorable jobs on the first day because it was the danger of working steel. I was trying to get out of the way, and one time, he said, "Son, you're going to get hurt trying to get out the way more so than anything falling on you." [laughing]

[01:46:25] And I learned about rigging. That was old-school longshore work. That stands out in my mind first, more than any job that I had as a lasher or anything like that.

[01:46:45] Suffice it to say that when I became a longshore worker, I was 38 years old. Aside from the work that I had done, Harvey, at that steel plant where they had fabricated steel—and that was chopping steel up and stuff like that—I didn't operate any equipment or anything, so my hand-eye coordination—so I'll never forget, a guy told me, "Man, you should have stayed in the business world than coming down to the waterfront." He was making fun of me.

[01:47:26] But let me just say this. The old-timers, who knew my father, would always let me know that they did. Longshore workers would always tell you about your dad so that you knew what you had to do to measure up.

[01:47:50] One time, I remember working with a guy, and I can't remember his name. Didn't particularly like him in the beginning, but grew to have a lot of respect for him. He said, "Clarence, you're nothing like your old man." I said, "Yeah, I know. That's because my old man sent me to college, and I hadn't planned on being a longshore worker until now." That was my comeback to him. Later on in years, when I became the secretary-treasurer, he said, "Yeah, you finally found the work that you're good at." [laughter]

[01:48:30] Suffice it to say that the old-timers, I felt an obligation because I knew the kind of guy my dad was, and although I might not have been as good as he was at doing certain things, I wanted to measure up and I wanted to do my part. And I took work seriously.

[01:48:57] I have to say, though, Harvey, I wasn't a guy who worked a lot of shifts when I came on the waterfront. I probably worked maybe three or four days a week. It was certainly the job that paid the best wages that I'd ever had. There was no doubt about that.

[01:49:17] But when you're on the waterfront, you find things that are suitable for you, or at least you think are suitable for you. And you learn that all money isn't good money. In other words, there are certain jobs that may be more dangerous or more toxic, and I didn't have any trouble staying away from those jobs.

[01:49:40] But I did like the freedom. I also liked the people. I learned a lot from various guys, even people who some folks say, "You don't listen to him too much." But I learned from those who did things the right way. I learned from those who did things the wrong way.

[01:50:04] In growing up around longshore workers, I'll never forget my barber had someone that worked in his barbershop. He and his wife owned this barbershop in West Oakland. I remember so vividly in 1959 that one of his barbers' husbands got hired on the waterfront, and it was a really big deal. Everybody in the barbershop was talking about it.

[01:50:39] I had a sense of what longshoremen were from being around my grandfather and friends of his. They owned homes. They drove nice cars. They were able to take their wives on vacations. They had disposable income. So, I understood and respected that job and all that it could do, because I saw what it had done for my father and my mother and my siblings.

[01:51:14] But I have to say, Harvey, that one of the things that I enjoyed most about being a member of ILWU Local 10, and being in the ILWU, was, in fact, its politics and its activities. It was a man like Leo Robinson who had encouraged me to become involved in the Legislative Action Committee, the East Bay Legislative Committee.

[01:51:42] And I remember Leo said, "Politicians have a way of wanting people to think that they are superior to the people, and it's just the opposite. But you don't find that out really until election time when they come around and they want your vote." He was one of the ones that really encouraged me to be on the East Bay Legislative Committee. I chaired that committee for a number of years in the East Bay.

[01:52:24] **HARVEY:** When was that when you started?

[01:52:26] **CLARENCE:** I would say it was in the early 90s. That's when I got on the Executive Board. I was on the Board of Trustees. I'll never forget, I was taking minutes at the Board of Trustees. From my days in law school, I took copious notes. I'll never forget, one of the trustees said, "Brother, you don't need to include all that information in the minutes." [laughing]

[01:52:57] I said, "Why not?"

[01:52:59] He said, “Just the moves, seconded and carried.” But I always liked to put in what people said.

[01:53:08] **HARVEY:** For historians, that’s very valuable, by the way. I’ve read a lot of minutes for various unions, things I’ve written about, and when you have a guy who takes those copious notes instead of just saying “move, carry,” you’re very happy.

[01:53:21] **CLARENCE:** Oh, yeah.

[01:53:22] **HARVEY:** I want to ask you a little detail question. How did you happen to get with Hilliard on the first day doing that steel job? Was that a coincidence that Hilliard happened to be there?

[01:53:39] **CLARENCE:** No, it wasn’t a coincidence. We were in the hall talking. When you’re a B man, you get the leftovers, whatever jobs are left over that the A men didn’t take or don’t want. So, one guy said, “You should take the job. We’re going over to . . .” I don’t know if it was Encinal? It might have been Encinal. It might have been [unintelligible] . One of those two places, wherever we were.

[01:54:14] Unlike Cleophas Williams, I didn’t come back home and write about my first day on the job, like Cleophas did. But it was in the hall, and I went because they were going there. They said, “We’ll all be together and we’ll show you the ropes.”

[01:54:36] **HARVEY:** And Hilliard was one of those guys?

[01:54:42] **CLARENCE:** Yeah. It was David Hilliard, and it was a friend of his who he had grown up with. Either C. J. or A. J. Phillips was his last name. The three of us were working altogether. They were giving me the 4-1-1 on the guys that we were working with, telling me about them, then telling me about their experiences.

[01:55:17] David had been out of the union for a number of years and was able to come back. That just goes to show you the power and the influence that the ILWU had in those days. David was full-time in the Black Panther Party and wasn’t doing—that’s why he never did get his A book. He was a B man for all these numbers of years. But people thought that the work that he was doing, and he had a reputation, and he was kept on. He was able to come back.

[01:55:55] Harvey, some guys, they really liked the work, but I was 38 years old. I had a certain kind of an attitude about the work that I was doing. I knew it was an important job. I was trying to stay out of harm’s way. But more than anything, I think, I was getting adjusted to the culture of what it means to be a longshore worker.

[01:56:34] I never will forget. Someone had written something about Leo Robinson, who I thought was one of the brightest guys that I met in my years on the waterfront. He said that no one leaves the waterfront the same when they start working there. Your attitude towards the world, society, and all of that will change.

[01:57:02] I began to understand that no worker in the world better understands capitalism than a longshore worker, because until that cargo comes off of the ship, it can’t be sold as merchandise, and longshore workers understand the power that they have at the point of production. I think that probably, for me, making the adjustment to what the waterfront was like—

[01:57:35] When I was a kid, I couldn't understand, because I would hear people talk. "There's all kinds of people that work on the waterfront from all walks of life. They've got people with PhDs. They have people who are college dropouts. They have people who are alcoholics."

[01:57:51] I couldn't understand or envision a place that could accommodate all of these kinds of people, but I found out once I became a member. One of the things that was readily evident for me to see was that longshore workers were special, and no matter what one's—I guess the best way to say it is in the Constitution, they talk about it's a person's ability, not who their parents were or how much money they had or how much education.

[01:58:38] You have to prove yourself on the waterfront. They didn't give a damn if you had a PhD, or if you had gone to law school or gone to college. They didn't care about that. I think that longshore workers care about that when you can demonstrate that skillset in some meaningful way to them without you telling me, "I've got this," "I have that." When you can demonstrate to longshore workers by your intellect or your capability, and people say, "This guy, or this woman, knows how to do things. They're educated. We can see it based on how they operate."

[01:59:17] I say that because a guy like Leo Robinson, who was a high school dropout, was one of the brightest guys that I ever met. He was a guy who had a photographic memory, and he was a guy who valued education, even though he didn't graduate from high school. He said, "The reason I didn't graduate from high school was because I was running around with my thug friends, and I knew I was going to end up in jail."

[01:59:46] That just speaks to the whole issue of peer group pressure in growing up. I would say this. What Leo Robinson, Trent Willis, Clarence Thomas all have in common is that all of our fathers belonged to ILWU Local 10. Dellums and Leo were classmates at Oakland Tech. I don't know how close they were. I don't think they were all that close. But we all went to Oakland Tech, and I think that was a coincidence.

[02:00:36] But what I don't think is a coincidence is that our fathers were longshore workers, members of Local 10, and I just have to think that that made some impact on us in terms of our social justice and activism, coming from a union like that. Obviously, coming from a longshore family gives you certain benefits in terms of healthcare and home and living wages and all these sorts of things, but that union—and I knew that coming in, and I understood that. That never changed, no matter what kind of experience I might have had on the job, or who I might have been confronted with.

[02:01:19] I can remember Ah Quon McElrath. Are you familiar with her, out of Hawaii?

[02:01:28] **HARVEY:** Ah Quon McElrath. Yeah.

[02:01:30] **CLARENCE:** I never will forget, she was speaking at a longshore—not a caucus, a convention—and she made a comment. She said, "The union has survived militant good leadership and bad, and it's still here. We've had different kinds of leadership and the institution prevails."

[02:01:58] That had special meaning to me because I could see what she was talking about. I never let certain individuals or people influence and poison my attitude toward the union, because I understood what it was. I can look on that wall in Local 10, where they have all those photographs, and see all of the men who had contributed in making this union what it was, and what it is. Everybody had a role to play in it.

[02:02:33] **HARVEY:** It's very, very helpful.

[02:02:36] **CLARENCE:** How're we doing, Harvey?

[02:02:37] **HARVEY:** We're doing okay. We'll have another session subsequent to this, I presume.

[02:02:42] **CLARENCE:** What do you want to do now?

[02:03:36] [Discussion not pertinent to interview]

[02:03:37] **HARVEY:** Clarence, I know your interest is really in the cultural and political life of the union rather than on the job, but we usually ask, what was the best job and the worst job? What kinds of job stories do you recall?

[02:04:28] **CLARENCE:** The job stories I recall, some of the funnier ones, because the way that the waterfront works is that on every job, there's going to be jobs that are going to be more desirable for certain workers, in terms of being able to go home early.

[02:04:50] When you start out, you're on the hole board, so things like lashing—that's securing containers to the ship—is a big part of it. Working on the dock. Dealing with [?cones?] . When I first started, we used to go on top of containers. The [?bridle?] would take you on top of the container [and you'd take hold?] . And I used to really like that job because I had a chance to see how beautiful the Bay Area was, with the skyline of San Francisco and the Bay Bridge.

[02:05:28] I also liked the idea of working alone. You had a partner when you were on top. The [?bridle?] would take you and put you on the side of the container. You'd walk off and you'd take the cones off of the containers—they weren't automatic cones in those days—and you would put them in the bridle, or you were locking the cones. When it got really windy, you had to lay on your belly with a long pole and unlock.

[02:05:58] I remember one of the old-timers—Whitaker was his name and he was a walking boss—he said, "Thomas, you scared?"

[02:06:09] I said, "Yeah, I'm scared. Of course I am." [laughter]

[02:06:13] But I found out that I wasn't afraid of heights. He taught me how to stand and how to do things. I used to really like that job because you only were working when it was necessary.

[02:06:27] This led to a funny story. There was a longshoreman who had fallen asleep in the shack. We called it that. It was a place where the longshoremen rested in between when they're not working. Blockhouse is what they probably call it now.

[02:06:51] The walking boss had been calling for a guy and the walking boss came off the ship and walked to the blockhouse, and the guy was asleep. The walking boss turns to his partner and says, "Tell your partner as long as he's asleep, he's on the payroll, but when he wakes up, he's fired."

[02:07:15] I always laughed at that. But the moral of that story is you have to pay attention. I don't know how many times I remember, when I was lashing, and we used to draw cards, pull cards, to see who could go home because if a ship was going to be working down below for a long period of time, we don't need the lashers, so the lashers can go home.

[02:07:43] But the walking bosses always liked to keep a few guys around in case of emergency. I can remember on a number of occasions not taking the highest card. "Go to the shack until we call you." What I learned was even though sometimes you're not going home, you're reading in the blockhouse or falling asleep. You're on the job but you're not working. So, you learn a lot about democracy.

[02:08:23] I worked as a steady man. Didn't like it at all. Did not like it at all, because it really went against everything that I thought a longshore worker was about, and that's the freedom. I made more money, but I was working every day. They would call you on the phone. You wouldn't go to the hall to tell you where you were working.

[02:08:53] I was also confronted with the reality that some guys who were steady thought the worst thing in the world was being sent back to the hall. They really got attached to "this is my top pick, this is my [?side pick?] ." It's like they think they own the machine.

[02:09:13] They don't want to go back to the hall, and I found some of those guys were very different from longshoremen. The guys who were steady and who were stewards, they were unique, because they made sure that I may be steady, but I don't go for any BS on the job. We're going to stick to the contract. I don't go for the okey doke. No. I may be steady, and the reason why they were steady is because of the fact that a lot of them were good operators. Some of them were mechanics. I was never a mechanic, but I knew mechanics.

[02:10:01] But I didn't like being steady, and I wasn't the most proficient operator. I was slower than most of the guys. I think they kept me on because some of the guys I was working with wanted me to stay there. I was a good worker—I showed up—but I wasn't a fast guy.

[02:10:22] I think had I started working on the waterfront when I was 21, 22 years old, I probably would have been a hell of a crane operator by the time I turned 38. But I operated what they called the transtainer. That's a crane on wheels. No one ever got hurt that I was working around. I was always a very cautious worker.

[02:10:45] I did that for about a year, and I did that job because when I came on, there weren't a lot of young people, so they wanted guys—I was 38, that's fairly young—they wanted guys. I was glad when they sent me back to the hall. I was really glad to be back. I made more money, but you worked every day and it was not the same. It just wasn't the same.

[02:11:09] The job that I liked the most was being a lineman. That is tying up and letting vessels go. I used to see guys and they always reminded me that they were different. You would see them come and go, because they're only there when it's time to tie up or let go. That's the only time you see these guys.

[02:11:42] It was one of the most democratic and empowering of all the boards that I worked on. Whoever was the first person dispatched as a lineman, that was the boss for the night. The lead man is the person who is the first person dispatched to a line job. You're responsible for turning in the payroll. You're responsible to make

sure that all of your people are on the job. That means if somebody oversleeps or is late, you ask them, "Where were you at?" Be the contact. People should contact the lead man.

[02:12:25] I think that one of the things about being the lead man is your supervision is the superintendent. You don't have a walking boss. You turn the ticket in to the superintendent. If a longshore worker, for whatever reason, who's a lineman doesn't show up for the job, the employer says, "We're not going to pay that person." Not a problem. I'm going to call somebody from the hall. There will be somebody on the payroll for this job, even though that person did not show up.

[02:13:01] Interestingly enough, when there's a lot of work in the hall—and the employers know this; there's a lot of ships—they don't have a problem with guys working short then if everybody doesn't show up, because they understand things are busy.

[02:13:19] I never will forget, one time we were letting a ship go and someone came up to me—I think I was the lead man—and they said, "Hey, all your guys didn't show up." I said, "That's true. What time does your watch say?" He said, "My watch says 6:45." I said, "This was a 7:00 start. The ship was let go early. You've got a problem with that?" "Oh, no, no, no. We don't have a problem with that." Of course not.

[02:13:48] The reality is that the old-timers who were linemen, before we had cell phones and beepers and all that, they'd have to be up all night long. And that's the small parking lot. You know where the small parking lot is at the hall. Not the big parking lot, the one around the corner, across the street from the hotel. That's where the linemen would have to be. Up all night. Going in there, finding out where they're going to be working. The ship must sail on time, the ship has to be let gone. Let go and sailing is the same thing.

[02:14:31] I probably liked that job more because it was the epitome of freedom. If you wanted to be on, you got on the board. If you wanted to get off, you could get off. No matter how many times a day, that's how it worked. You really found out about guys in terms of what their character is like. Being able to rely on people. People being held accountable.

[02:15:05] Whenever there was a job where somebody didn't show up, and somebody else was called to be put on the payroll, I never had anybody to tell me, "Brother Thomas, don't put me on the payroll because this guy didn't show up." They always took the money. [laughing]

[02:15:28] What I mean by that is let's say, Harvey, that you didn't show up and Conor is the next person in line for the job, and he didn't get that job that night because you got the last job. You don't show up, for whatever reason, you get replaced. Conor gets the money, even though Conor wasn't on the job.

[02:15:54] That speaks to the power of the ILWU to make sure that everybody's going to get paid on this job. Even though you don't want to pay this person who didn't show up, somebody's going to be on the payroll. The job was done and that's that.

[02:16:14] Some people don't like to replace people. I always said, "Freedom is not free. It comes with being accountable and being responsible."

[02:16:23] But that's the job that I enjoyed the most. I think that most of the old-timers will tell you that that's the job that they cared for the most because of the freedom that it presents itself to you. The idea of longshore

workers being able to take vacations and do things at any time that their families say they want to do it, and you can do that, and you can come back. “Hey, Thomas, where you been, man?” “I was in Havana.” Or “I was in Japan at a conference.” “Oh, man, you always doing something.” “Yeah, man, you could do it, too, if you took off.”

[02:17:05] Harry and the old-timers wanted longshore workers to make more money and work less. Some people want to flip the script and want to work more and not less.

[02:17:20] I think some of the most gratifying times I spent on the waterfront was when I had a job and I needed to be at an Executive Board meeting. Typically, you would square off, which means that you sign the sheet that says “I’m not working tonight.” The next day, you’re at the top, they dispatch the people who squared off first. In other words, you’re the first guy out tomorrow on the whole board because the board stopped on the guy in front of you yesterday, but I squared off because I went to the Executive Board meeting, I’m going to be dispatched before you, even though you’re the first guy, because I’m the guy who squared off and I went to the meeting.

[02:18:12] Sometimes guys would say, “Hey, Clarence, you don’t have to square off, man. We’ll cover you until you get back from the meeting, or give us a report on what happened.” Sometimes.

[02:18:21] Depending on the bosses, some bosses are very hall-centric, meaning that they understand the hall. They would be guys who would say, “You know, Thomas, when I first came on the waterfront and guys would walk about and say, ‘Don’t tell nobody anything, but you guys need to call the hall to get some more men to be out here working. They don’t have enough guys.’” These are men who even though they were bosses, their allegiance lies with the hall. They were guys who would speak up and tell you things to show you the ropes.

[02:18:55] I guess one of my earlier experiences in being told what not to do was I had a container job, and a superintendent came up to me—I was a B man—and he started talking to me and giving me directions. Of course, I looked at him. I hadn’t responded, but he came up to me and talked. Then I heard the voice of Chuck [?Minkins?] , who was a walking boss. He said, “Hey!” And he used a longshore vernacular that starts with an M and an F. [laughing] “You don’t talk to him. I’m his boss.” Then he turned to me and said, “Youngblood, you don’t listen to anything the superintendents tell you. You only take your orders from the walking bosses, not the superintendents.” I didn’t have to be told that but one time.

[02:19:54] And I probably had more hours from working as a lineman. It’s a job that’s based upon the issue of seniority. I don’t know too many people who didn’t like being a lineman, unless they just wanted to be a crane operator or a clerk. But if you have trouble waking up in the middle of the night, or with sleeping, it’s not a job for you. It’s a job for people who can take power naps.

[02:20:22] But if you don’t feel like working, you just get off the board. Of course, you don’t make any money when you’re not working. But I probably liked that job the most.

[02:20:36] **HARVEY:** What job did you dislike?

[02:20:42] **CLARENCE:** That’s not a difficult one at all. That would be at Matson when we were working lashing containers that contained livestock, like cows, where you could smell them. And you’d have to get on your knees. You‘ve got chains. I mean, boy, talk about a job that made me think about enslavement, only

because of the chains, and how you had to get on your knees and stuff. That was a job that you really had to take in order to make the night. That was the job that I did not like at all because you were dealing with chains and that kind of lashing, and you had to get on your knees, and the cows stink. [laughing]

[02:21:34] **HARVEY:** Did you ever work hides?

[02:21:37] **CLARENCE:** No, the hides were in containers.

[02:21:40] **HARVEY:** Old-time stuff.

[02:21:45] **CLARENCE:** I had a barber who didn't become a longshore worker, because he could have started in 1963 with my father, but he had worked as a casual. They would give you boots and all kinds of stuff. The hides would be slipping, and maggots would come on there. He worked that job and he let that job tell him, "I can't work on the waterfront." He lived to regret that experience.

[02:22:23] Clerk jobs were okay. I'll tell you a little story about that and how my life would have changed. I never took typing in school, unlike my father. My father could type his ass off. I had passed the test for being a clerk but I couldn't pass the typing test. You were supposed to be able to do 12 words a minute and I came up short.

[02:22:46] But I always wondered how my life would have changed had I become a clerk. Would I have done the things that I had done as a longshore worker? My mother has a saying. "Whatever's for you, you're going to get, and what isn't, it's just not for you." But I thought I wanted to be a clerk. My dad wanted to be one. He took a lot of clerk jobs, and he was good at it, too.

[02:23:17] I took some walking boss jobs. Interestingly enough, I got a call one time, because I had been interviewed. They called me and said, "Thomas, you should take more walking boss jobs." I had been to Bangladesh because SSA was attempting to privatize a port at Chittagong.

[02:24:04] I went over there and met with the longshore workers in Bangladesh. I spoke, and met with them, and all that. When I got back, I got a phone call—I think it was from SSA—and the guy said, "Thomas, you don't take these extra walking boss jobs." I always said, I wonder if they called me because they knew I'd been to Bangladesh and shit. [laughing] Maybe not.

[02:24:35] Being a walking boss wasn't in the cards for me. I didn't particularly care for it too much, to be honest with you.

[02:24:42] **HARVEY:** How come?

[02:24:44] **CLARENCE:** Well, I wasn't necessarily interested in supervising longshore workers. I liked the idea of being able to make my money and go home. I was never one—and in some instances, people thought—it's not true—that they had to kiss the boss's ass in order to become that. I always said, "This is a job where you don't have to kiss people's ass. You don't have to. Maybe you don't become a full-time walking boss, but if you're four or five days a week, what's the difference?"

[02:25:24] So, the idea of the independence never left me about being a longshore worker. To me, that's the power of the hall. I'll never forget, Leo Robinson and Cleophas Williams were the only two Black men that were in the video called Harry Bridges: A Man and His Union. You ever saw that video?

[02:25:47] **HARVEY:** Yeah.

[02:25:47] **CLARENCE:** They were interviewing those two men about the 1971 strike. Cleophas spoke very eloquently first, and then Leo. Leo talked about how "Last night, I worked for Matson, and the night before that, I worked at APL. I have no allegiance to those companies. My allegiance is to the hall."

[02:26:10] I think, to me, that's always been critical. I don't have any animosity against people that are steady. I've known some good guys. But I think, for me, that goes against what being a longshoreman really is for me.

[02:26:31] **HARVEY:** Clarence, when did you become an A card man?

[02:26:37] **CLARENCE:** That must have been in 1986, and the reason for that, Harvey, is because of the fact that I came in under the Permissive Rule. I did not come in as a casual and have to work a certain number of hours. I came as a B man, and there weren't very many B people working.

[02:27:02] I will say this. I probably could have been promoted earlier had I worked more, but I don't think it was more than a year and a half or so where I was an A man, working. I never will forget. As a B man, you only get what's left over. There was a guy by the name of Larry the Finn—that was his nickname because he was from Finland—he worked a lot of ships. They were asking for A men to double up, meaning that they already had gotten, let's say, a 3:00 start. Now, they're getting a 6:00 start, so they're taking two jobs before a B man gets a job.

[02:27:51] I went up to the window, and Larry walked in front of me, and somebody said, "Hey, Larry, let that B man get a job. You already worked today." Larry turned around and looked, and he walked away from the [?shoe?] , from the dispatch window. I never will forget that that day because I always told longshoremen—in particular, linemen—I said, "Greed is not limited to Wall Street."

[02:28:21] They'd say, "What do you mean?"

[02:28:23] I said, "It's also here on the waterfront. You've got to be mindful. These jobs are not lineman jobs, these are ILWU jobs, so when you don't show up for these jobs, they're going to the hall."

[02:28:36] They said, "I never looked at it quite that way."

[02:28:39] I said, "Yeah, this is a union, and there's something about the men who organized this union and founded it. Not only were they leftist—some were in the Party, some were not—but they believed in democracy, and they believed in socialism, and they were anti-greed. These are things that have stayed with me about this union and what it's really all about."

[02:29:12] But, Harvey, I can tell you this. The actions that we've taken over the last 20 years since I've been a longshore worker—before I came on the waterfront, it was the issue of the anti-apartheid action, which started in 1976 when Leo Robinson witnessed on television the Soweto massacres.

[02:29:42] From 1977 up to 1984, there was so many different actions that were taking and activities, whether or not it was community picket lines at Berth 80 in San Francisco, or whether or not it was ILWU members securing containers from different shipping companies, loading them up with humanitarian supplies, sending them to Southern Africa.

[02:30:15] I missed all of that. I came on the year after the 1984 Nedlloyd Kimberly stuff. But actions related to other activities emanating from 1999, with Mumia Abu-Jamal, I just liked the idea of the longshore union understanding that political prosecution and persecution in the courts is something that went on with Tom Mooney, it went on with Harry Bridges, and they understood the connection between that and Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal and others. They understand the connection, the nexus, between [Howard] Sperry and [Nick] Bordoise—I hope I'm not mispronouncing his name—Bordoise—who was shot in the back on July 5, 1934, part of Bloody Thursday, and the connection between that and Oscar Grant and George Floyd. The police represent the state.

[02:31:37] I found it very ironic that sometimes I would have to be the individual that would go to the San Francisco Police Department to get a permit for us to do a demonstration in Harry Bridges Plaza. I'd have to go down and deal with the cops. Sometimes I would meet cops who had relatives on the waterfront, active members. Then there were others who said, "My great-grandfather was a longshoreman. He was around during the 1934 strike."

[02:32:09] They understand that history. You don't see the San Francisco Police Department getting out of line when the ILWU wants to do anything in San Francisco, and it's because of that history.

[02:32:23] But that history means something, and it lives on, those traditions live on. I would say to you that I have felt a great deal of pride, a great deal of feeling very fortunate to have been a longshore worker, to have been able to express so many of my own political aspirations and views, and to be able to connect with the community in such meaningful ways, which is why I believe that the longshore workers don't have the resentment from the community about how much money they may make—there may be some, but in the main—because they understand that longshore workers have stood up for issues in the community.

[02:33:20] You've got union members who can't even bring up certain issues, Harvey, in their own union, who will come to the ILWU for an audience, Local 10. I think that we've managed to see, as Cleophas Williams, the first Black man to be elected an officer in an ILWU local, said, that "This is a union that has supported the vision and ambition of Harry Bridges, but who weren't afraid to take him on." This is a special place.

[02:34:03] That microphone at that union hall, where workers can get up and speak and be able to bring matters up before the body, and be able to make motions, that's real democracy. Sometimes things go your way, sometimes they don't, but you have your chance, you have your say when you go before that membership and speak.

[02:34:32] **HARVEY:** I'm glad you made that clear because democracy is one of the things that the union is so famous and great about. You mentioned you started getting into committee work. Is it in the 1990s or so?

[02:34:58] **CLARENCE:** Yes. Do you remember Rich Cavalli?

[02:35:00] **HARVEY:** Oh, yeah.

[02:35:01] **CLARENCE:** I was the chairman and I think he was the secretary of the East Bay Legislative Committee. That was the group that endorsed and interviewed candidates, brought issues. I really enjoyed that. You know why? Because it was grassroots.

[02:35:26] At the end of the day, all politics are local, and you've got to be involved. And I had no problems in dealing with that milieu until I just got a little tired of dealing with these Democrats and going to these meetings in D.C. Larry Wing and others. I was not a part of their group. He started sending other people there, which was fine.

[02:35:58] But I had gotten my fill out of that. I thought that I had done all that I could do. I did some meaningful work around port security—TWIC [Transportation Worker Identification Credential]—and I always felt that this was an opportunity to be able to hold these elected officials accountable—I thought we could—by holding their feet to the fire.

[02:36:21] But, yeah, that's when it all started, and we used to meet—I think it was the second Tuesday of every month—at Local 6. There were Local 6 members on there. There were people who were active in the community that were on that committee.

[02:36:35] **HARVEY:** Was Don Watson on there with you?

[02:36:40] **CLARENCE:** Don Watson. That's where I met Don Watson. Yes. A man by the name of Terry Green from Local 6. I mentioned Cavalli. David Stewart, who was a confidante of Leo Robinson. David and Leo were very active in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, which is where the resolution to make Martin Luther King Jr's birthday a holiday came from.

[02:37:19] Leo was an advocate of longshore workers being involved in other organizations, like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. They started an organization called the Southern Africa Liberation Support Committee during the anti-apartheid. It was the first anti-apartheid union collective.

[02:37:52] I enjoyed doing that work. It was also sort of a relief. Sometimes longshore work can become mundane and get routine. It's nice to be able to—because I think that anyone who is active, anyone who has concerns beyond the waterfront—because that's one of the things I found fascinating.

[02:38:19] If you had interests beyond the waterfront—I was even a part of a doggone investment club, Harvey, at one point, of young men who wanted to be—and did quite well. The people had different interests. I was a young A man. We were going to start an investment club. I'll be a part of that. It was with other longshore workers. I found out that other old-timers had done the same thing.

[02:38:46] **HARVEY:** Cleophas was in one.

[02:38:46] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, Cleophas was in one. I tell you what else I found out. For those of us on the left, the real revolutionaries are people who are where the masses are. They're not isolated. What I mean by that is that there are certain kinds of reforms that revolutionaries can be a part of because what they teach people that they're working with is that you can achieve these things independently without going through elected officials and all this kind of shit. You can make things happen from down below. That was political work.

[02:39:47] Lawrence Thibodeaux and I were involved in a movement in 1999 to secure longshore jobs at the Burlington Northern Santa Fe joint intermodal terminal in Oakland. It's on 7th and Maritime Way. It's right across from the SSA.

[02:40:16] Burlington Northern Santa Fe intermodal yard is not an on-dock, it's a near-dock. We weren't able to secure that work because the Teamsters got it because their wages are lower than ours. But one of the things that came out of that, there was an organization called the Coalition for an Accountable Port, which was made up of AFL-CIO-related unions. It was made up of an interfaith community, community organizations and environmentalists.

[02:40:47] We were concerned that there be some kind of a mechanism to ensure that all the jobs that emanated from the expansion of the port from Berth 55 all the way up to 62, that those construction jobs be done by construction people, and that the longshore jobs that emanated from that expansion, there would be a certain number of people from West Oakland and the Fruitvale.

[02:41:22] So, Lawrence Thibodeaux and I worked on that program. There were some 5,000 people that showed up at the Port of Oakland in 1999 for the purpose of securing jobs as casuals. We set up a signup at the West Oakland Library, across the street from DeFremery Park, and also in a community facility in the Fruitvale, because those were the two areas that were impacted by truck traffic from the ports.

[02:41:55] We were able to make sure that I think it was 10 percent of all the hires that came about came from those two communities. That was really meaningful to me. We had so many people.

[02:42:11] But then, when they started to bring the people in from these communities, and some of the folks had been arrested for drugs, and the PMA [Pacific Maritime Association] wanted to say, "No, we can't bring you on the waterfront," and I had to raise my voice and say, "Hey, wait a minute. Who did you think you were going to be reaching out to?"

[02:42:32] PMA went through this big deal. "Oh, we're going to have people from the community hired," and all this shit, and then people who had been arrested, you're not going to let them in? I said, "You know, you're not giving them a job. You're giving them an opportunity." Henry Graham was the President of Local 10 at that time.

[02:42:53] Those are some memorable occasions, and I can remember people who, when they were filling out their applications, and they asked me a question, "Brother Clarence, should we put down here that we have been arrested?" I said, "Put it down, because if they should ever go back over your file and find out that you lied, they'll hold that against you."

[02:43:16] And I didn't even know that they were going to be doing a job on TRIC card until later. People came to me and said, "Brother Clarence, you were right." I said, "Yeah, tell the truth."

[02:43:26] I thought it was ridiculous for some of your top crane operators who had what I would call youthful indiscretions and had been arrested. I said, "What does national security have to do with that? With loading onions or sacks of flour?" It was all a means of being able to get into the hiring of ILWU members as the 1950 Coast Guard regulations were determining who could work on the waterfront, or work at certain facilities, or not.

[02:44:08] I think that for me, Harvey, and for so many others, the community is where we come from. We come from the community. We all live in some community. Some of us have moved to different communities. We grew up in West Oakland, we grew up in the Fillmore, and now, we live in different communities, but we still represent the community because our families are still in these communities.

[02:44:38] So, in order for the union to be relevant to the community in some meaningful way—and I think that the ILWU has done that in so many ways—and I think that the other thing—and we need to be real about this—is that there have been differences between the leadership and the rank-and-file on union issues, and that even happened during Harry's time.

[02:45:08] I mention Leo Robinson again because there was a point when Harry got quite resentful of people who were challenging him around the issue of [Modernization and Mechanization 1960 Contract section] 9.43 and the whole issue of steady people. He was trying to shut down that discord, and one of the old-timers said, "Harry, you can't do that. That's the same thing you did when you were challenging the leadership of Joe Ryan." [laughing] He had to laugh because it was true.

[02:45:41] **HARVEY:** Did Bridges laugh at that point?

[02:45:42] **CLARENCE:** Yeah, he laughed, too, from what I was told, of the irony of it all. I think that one of the things that I admire about this institution is that, listen, we can be critical of the leadership. That's our right. If we can be critical of the President of the United States, as in the case of Franklin Delano Roosevelt scolding Harry Bridges in 1939 about refusing to send scrap iron to Japan as an Axis of Evil before they bombed Pearl Harbor—Harry told him that that was our right and our privilege to be able to do that. He was telling Harry to stay out of matters of US foreign policy. If we can criticize the President of the United States, we can criticize our leadership, too. And it's not personal.

[02:46:47] I think that's another thing. I have never been in a more dynamic and difficult political environment than I've been in at Local 10. It's different. It's not just Local 10, it's any ILWU.

[02:47:08] **HARVEY:** Speaking of leadership, around this point in time, you run for office. Can we talk about your decision to run for office, how that comes about?

[02:47:22] **CLARENCE:** Yes, my decision to run for office. I first was involved with the Executive Board and the Board of Trustees, and that's where it all started. I was really reluctant to run for office, to be honest with you. I just wasn't willing to invest [laughing] all that had to be required. You have to really have thick skin to be in politics in the ILWU because it can get pretty rough.

[02:47:56] I went to Executive Board meetings and I took notes. I was involved. It's hard for me to not take notes in meetings. I never will forget, I was in a meeting, and after the meeting was over, I was talking with Leo. He never took notes. He said he had a photographic memory. I believe him because that guy could remember shit that I couldn't. He said, "Don't you remember that?" I said, "No, man. I don't see that in my notes. I must have been taking notes when something was being covered and I missed that." [laughing]

[02:48:43] You learn a lot going to the Executive Board meetings. You learn a great deal. And I also learned how important it is to be able to record information that does not get adopted, because this gives people an opportunity to discuss matters when it comes to those who might have advocated for the minority position. They can come to the meeting. Robert's Rules of Order, they can raise their hand and they can get up and they can have people to vote on the positions that lost.

[02:49:28] The importance of learning Robert's Rules of Order, because that's your armor. That's what it takes to be able to be heard. Another way of looking at it, it's also a way of silencing the opposition, too, if you don't understand what it is. [laughing]

[02:49:52] That's where it all started for me was the Executive Board and on the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees merely makes recommendations. They don't make the final decisions about the money. I learned that the hard way. There was a meeting that I went to and there was a lot of resentment about the union spending a certain amount of money. When the matter that I was interested in came up, they decided to vote my thing down because they were voting everything down that had to do with money that night. [laughing] Sometimes things get confused.

[02:50:38] I wound up running against a legend, who was the secretary-treasurer. I can't remember Bill's last name.

[02:50:54] **HARVEY:** Watkins.

[02:50:55] **CLARENCE:** Watkins! That's who I ran against to become the secretary-treasurer of ILWU Local 10.

[02:51:04] **HARVEY:** How did you come to the decision to run?

[02:51:11] **CLARENCE:** I had been thinking about the idea. The person who preceded me, there was an African American woman who was much younger than me. Her name was Jolita. Her last name was Lewis. She'll kill me for not remembering her name.

[02:51:47] She was the first African American woman to be elected to be secretary-treasurer. Leo Robinson had supported her and encouraged her to run. Leo had encouraged me to run for that office, too. I hadn't made up my mind about it. So, I decided that I would, and I think the reason why I had done so is that I had been on committees and had done things, and I felt that I'd done enough things for people to know who I was and respected my work.

[02:52:28] When I talked about that information concerning trying to organize that Burlington Northern Santa Fe joining the modal terminal in Oakland, I was on disability at the time. I wasn't working.

[02:52:41] **HARVEY:** You'd been hurt?

[02:52:41] **CLARENCE:** I had torn my meniscus on the job. That was the first time I'd ever been hurt. I was off for about a year because after they had operated on me, they said there was a residual tear, and they had to go back in.

[02:53:02] But while I was off, I was very active. I was doing stuff because I wasn't working, and I was getting paid regularly. Unlike some people who have problems getting their money, they paid me on time. I got paid every two weeks from Marine Terminals, which is where I was hurt. It's now Ports of America, if I'm not mistaken, if they haven't changed the name again.

[02:53:26] Be that as it may, yeah, I always said, "Wow, I can do things. I'm not working. I can be on committees." We were doing a lot of stuff with the Port of Oakland. I was freed up, so I took advantage of my being off.

[02:53:48] My first year as secretary-treasurer, that was the year that we got locked out.

[02:54:00] **HARVEY:** One little question, and then, it's getting up to be 1:00, so we're going to have to come back—not today, I don't think, but we'll make another arrangement.

[02:54:10] **CLARENCE:** Okay.

[02:54:20] **HARVEY:** This is just an opinion. Why do you think you won against Bill Watkins?

[02:54:30] **CLARENCE:** I kinda think it had to do with new leadership. Leo Robinson once said—I've quoted Leo a lot—but he once said, "There's two kinds of leadership, tested and untested." And before I ran, I used to talk to old-timers. "Why do you vote for this guy?" They said, "Well, Thomas, we know his history."

[02:55:02] In many instances, the guys that I was asking about were guys that had proven themselves over the years. People like Larry Wing. People like Bill Watkins. These were guys who were legendary figures. So, I think the reason why I won [was Jolita Lewis] .

[02:55:44] She had served two terms as secretary-treasurer. She wasn't as political as Bill, but people saw that someone else could do the job. So, when it came up for me—and you know one of the reasons why? It's guys like Leo Robinson and others who were telling the old guys, "We should vote for this young man. He can do this work. We need new leadership." That was a part of it, I'm certain. I couldn't have won without the old-timers.

[02:56:19] I learned a very important lesson. Most of my support at Local 10 over the years, Harvey, came from people who came to the union meetings. The people who came to the union meetings voted for me because they were able to see me doing things at the meetings, getting up and expressing positions, representing the rank-and-file and not individual sectors of the union versus popularity.

[02:56:54] I was never the popularity guy. [laughing] There were some people who were very good at getting elected, but once they got into office, they were not as effective as those others who weren't as popular.